

Trolls and Their Toll on the Social Media Bridge of Communications

Brandi Bates Whitehurst

Santa Rosa County Public Information Office

August 30, 2019

Abstract

Social media has come to serve as one of the most effective communication platforms for those in public information, engaging large numbers of followers rapidly. With only a cellphone and internet access, a public information officer can get a message to thousands of social media followers in minutes, and through organic shares and retweets, potentially millions in a matter of days. This powerful medium, however, is a double-edged sword. As rapidly and widely as a well-crafted post can spread a positive message, a destructive or untrue comment from a troll can quickly send a negative message to the same audience. At their best, trolls can annoy followers or cause confusion in messaging; at their worst, they can damage the public's trust or kill an agency's creditability. The social media world is still developing. Despite the destruction a troll can yield, few solid defense tactics are available for combatting them. A survey of 150 public information officers from throughout the country was developed for this paper to share how trolls have affected the ability to distribute information to the public, and to share tactics for mitigating against the damage they can cause. Social media is too essential not to use, too potentially explosive not to monitor constantly, and evolves too quickly to develop lasting failsafe guidelines on moderation. The social media manager for a public agency must continually work to build and preserve a supportive online community, while maintaining a vigilant guard against negativity.

Keywords: troll, social media, Facebook, Twitter, public information officer (PIO)

Introduction

Social media is fast, cheap, easy, engaging, measurable, effective, and highly interactive. Supportive social media followers can assist an official agency with dissemination of their message exponentially by sharing posts with their friends and followers, but this valuable benefit is not without its risks (Destiny & Asude, 2018). Social media may serve well as a bridge of communications between official agencies and the public they serve, but predators lurk under that bridge in the form of trolls.

Trolls are identified as those who exhibit antisocial behavior using aggression and deception in an online forum to cause conflict and disruption (Cheng, Bernstein, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2017). Trolls come in many different forms, but the goal of all trolls is to wreak havoc on the creator of the post and any supporters. Most all social media users have witnessed how quickly a seemingly innocuous post can go down in flames under the attack of a troll or trolls. Moderators have few tools available to help manage comments and the uniqueness of each post makes setting definite rules impractical.

Researching the reasons some people find pleasure in trolling because intriguing after personally being targeted on social media while serving in an official capacity. This work attempts to give a better understanding of the troll, as well as share tactics utilized by public information officers (PIOs) to mitigate against them.

Method

Part of this research was conducted via a review of previously existing studies as to why persons are inclined to troll on social media. Additionally, a qualitative survey was developed, PIO and Social Media Trolls, to collect current data specifically for this research paper (see Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey), querying current public information officers

on their use of social media and how they mitigate the damage trolls can cause. Social media may be ever-changing, but it is growing daily and here to stay. Honing the skills to best manage online forums for public agencies is critical for the PIO.

Literature Review

The literature review for this paper was conducted between April and August of 2019, using Google Scholar and references from several of the articles retrieved in this search process. All articles with exception of one were restricted to publication within the last five years. One well-researched article by John Sular, PhD, *The Online Disinhibition Effect* (2004), which was referenced by several of the more recent publications for the description of the behavior in which people will say or do something online that normally they would never say or do in person, was included as the information was determined to be of better quality than any written since that time. A total of 11 articles were reviewed and analyzed and a determination was made to use only seven for this research.

Evita March, PhD and Jessica Marrington, PhD's *A Qualitative Analysis of Internet Trolling* (2019) revealed findings from a study of 379 survey participants from March and Marrington's community. The participants were asked to give their definitions of trolling, to describe the behaviors they felt constituted trolling, and asked if trolling differed from cyberbullying. Their survey also studied if the participants had ever been trolled and how that felt to them.

Barbara Lopes and Hui Yu's *Who Do You Troll and Why: An Investigation Into the Relationship Between the Dark Triad Personalities and Online Trolling Behaviors Towards Popular and Less Popular Facebook Profiles* (2017) studied 135 participants. The study group

comprised of students from a university, reviewed fake social media profiles and were asked to compare themselves to the fake profile as well as give feedback on some fictional trolling comments posted to the fabricated accounts. Their research indicated that trolls showed psychopathic tendencies.

In Claire Wolfe's *Online Trolls, Journalists and Freedom of Speech: Are the Bullies Taking Over?* (2019) as well as her article *Democracy Under Threat? Journalists Need Help in Handling Internet Trolls* (2018), she studied the challenges facing journalists as they engaged with their readers. Wolfe's research in both articles included interviews with new and experienced journalists as well as journalism students. Her findings showed many writers were pressured to create and maintain an online presence with their readers, but were often ill-equipped to respond to the onslaught of troll attacks.

Cheng et al.'s *Anyone Can Become a Troll: Causes of Trolling Behavior in Online Discussions* (2019) was a fascinating read, suggesting that mood and exposure to previous trolling behavior by others could influence an otherwise ordinary social media user to behave in a troll-like manner. Their findings were based on an experiment of a simulated online discussion with paid participants from the United States using Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing marketplace. The research they conducted even suggested that trolling behavior, like yawning, can be contagious and spread from user to user.

Finally, Destiny, and Asude's *Social Media and Crisis Management: A Review and Analysis of Existing Studies* (2018) detailed the pros and cons of social media in crisis management. Their findings showed strong evidence that social media worked well for creating awareness and disseminating information to the public. However, they warned that just as quickly, negative messages can be distributed and cautioned practitioners to have a thorough

working knowledge of the different social media platforms and how to best use it to communicate with their followers.

Plan of Action

To study the challenges trolls can bring to an agency, a 12-question qualitative survey was developed online in SurveyMonkey and distributed to 150 PIOs. The survey pool was solicited from students of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Master Public Information Officer Programs (Cohort 3), FEMA's Advanced Public Information Officer Program (May 2017), members of the National Information Officers Association Facebook Group, and members of the Government in Social Media Conference Official Facebook Group. Survey respondents were asked demographical questions about their experience, agency type, level of support from team members as well as their supervisors, as well as number and type of social media accounts managed. They were further queried regarding strategies for managing negative posts, the negative impact trolls had made on their ability to distribute information to the public, the use of archiving services, social media policies, as well as offered the opportunity to provide additional comments.

In retrospect, several of the questions could have been formatted to a multiple-response question style to give respondents an opportunity to select specific answers pertinent to their knowledge and experiences, in addition to the selection of "other" with a comments section to populate. Pertinent questions in this survey did, however, offer an opportunity for the respondent to select "other" and leave comments. Additionally, a question regarding how much time each PIO spends monitoring comments during "blue skies" or typical day-to-day operations, as well

as a “grey skies” incident, such as hurricane response, would have been valuable for providing research needed to create better staffing policies in the profession.

Results

Social Media is Critical for Public Agencies

Social media is a highly valuable tool for the PIO, for both awareness and crisis communications, given its capacity to correct misinformation, answer questions from the public, and share information faster than traditional media or email at little to no cost. Social media has enhanced crisis communication, transforming the usual one-way message delivery to more dynamic two-way conversations directly with the public (Destiny & Asude, 2018). A survey respondent who works as the PIO for a local municipality explained:

The importance of social media became clear in 2012 when we had a wildfire. A nearby town evacuated to our town and then we lost power for 10 days. Social media became the best way to get info out to locals and family members of those who had been evacuated (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).

Social Media is Challenging for Public Agencies

The PIOs surveyed managed an average of 3.57 social media accounts including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Nextdoor, LinkedIn, and SnapChat (see Table 1 for PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey results regarding social media accounts managed). Managing trolls on multiple social media sites and mitigating the damage they can cause to an agency’s brand weigh heavily on the often overloaded shoulders of the PIO. Unlike local office hours which

close to give employees much needed respite, social media is open 24 hours a day, and accessible from cars to couches all around the world.

Social media moderation takes its toll; in time, in money, and in stress. In the research of trolls and the emotional pain they inflicted on journalists, troll-pummeled writers who opted to stay in the game learned to fight back or self-censor their writing to be less troll-provoking, while others chose rather to leave the field altogether (Wolfe 2018). Some media outlets chose to restrict commenting or simply removed their comments sections due to the high cost of constant moderation. Recommendations from Wolfe's research were to disengage from the troll; while thoughtful journalism often does and should bring about healthy debate, some people only want to argue. As the old adage goes, "Don't wrestle with a pig. You both get dirty and the pig loves it."

Social media managers of multi-faceted agencies need the support of their colleagues to successfully build and maintain a healthy online community, but the dark side of social media can turn many vital resources off. A PIO who manages social media for a local municipality commented:

We're working to convince other department heads how valuable social media is for being transparent with our citizens, but trolls play a huge role in us being able to convince them. They feel like it causes more work for them and/or that social media 'only brings out the nay-sayers' (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).

Support of upper management is just as important, and that support starts with understanding of the positives as well as the perils of policing decorum in a public media forum. A PIO who serves a local municipality including fire and law enforcement stated:

I think having public administrators who at least somewhat understand social media would help all of us put more productive tools and policies into place. This is a huge detriment to the effectiveness of the position I hold as well as many others I've spoken to who are operating in similar environments (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).

What Makes a Troll?

What brings out the troll in a person? The “online disinhibition effect” popularized by psychologist John Suler (2004) details how social media can expose different sides of people. On the positive side, the effect can give the introverted the courage to share thoughtful feedback in a public forum. Conversely, it can encourage outrageous opinions one would never say in person. Most people have a friend or agreeable coworker who is typically quiet in person, but unveils a comedically snarky, less reserved side on social media. Take that same disinhibition effect, apply it to someone who is not pleasant by nature, and give him or her a social media forum to terrorize; now one has a user with a black belt in snarky, also known as the keyboard ninja.

Why Do Trolls Troll?

Lopes and Yu characterize trolls as psychopathic in *Who Do You Troll and Why: An Investigation Into the Relationship Between the Dark Triad Personalities and Online Trolling Behaviors Towards Popular and Less Popular Facebook Profiles* (2017), while March and Marrington went so far as to describe trolls as sadists in *A Qualitative Analysis of Internet Trolling* (2019). According to Cheng et al. (2017), trolls think they are funny, often feel they are smarter than others, and sometimes troll simply because they are bored. Trolling victims don't

think they are funny at all and reported feelings that range from being frustrated or troubled to incensed. ⁽¹⁾ In some more extreme cases of trolling, the creators of a post have been “doxxed,” a trolling practice by which the victim had his or her personal details, including address, cell phone number, email, etc. posted online (Wolfe, 2019).

In further studies by Cheng et al. (2017), trolling was found more often at night when people are tired, and more likely on Mondays than Fridays because almost no one likes Mondays. External negative factors can also play a role in the rousing of a troll. Thus posting information that is critical but not especially pleasing to the public, such as an unexpected closure of a well-traveled road or popular public service, on Monday evenings during a heat wave, blizzard, or power outage would be expected to bring out the trolls in droves.

What You Permit, You Promote

Sometimes it's the social media platform itself which can be a breeding ground for trolls. The prevalence of unmitigated negative posts can set the mood for more negative posts, and sites that develop a reputation of being routinely trolled are more inclined to stay that way. This is not unlike the broken windows theory introduced by Wilson and Kelling (1982) which states that visible signs of antisocial behavior and disorder begets more of the same. Consider a “Concerned Citizens of (insert local community name here)” Facebook group. If one thinks of this group as a virtual neighborhood and the negative posts as “broken windows,” a conclusion can be made that seeing the negative posts by others encourages more negative posts (Cheng et al., 2017). Or, as former President Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, has been credited as saying, “If you don't have anything nice to say, come sit by me.”

How Trolls Affect What We Post

Seventeen (11.33%) of the survey respondents from this study said trolls have affected their ability to distribute information during an emergency. Ten (6.67%) stated they always or usually choose a different method than social media for delivering certain messages because moderation of a post on a topic would be too daunting, however in retrospect, this survey question did not clarify that the social media post could be just one of the avenues of distribution. Steering clear of controversial topics was listed as a tactic to avoid attracting trolls according to survey respondents, showing the potential negative backlash from trolls does cause PIOs to give pause before posting.

“The Antidote for Fifty Enemies is One Friend,” Aristotle

Having loyal followers who can come to the support of an agency when negative comments are posted is a suggested way to shut down trolls.

“Generally, I find other people will speak up for us,” said a respondent from the public school system (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).

“We have a pretty great fan base that will have our backs and say things we wish we could say to a Negative Nancy,” added a PIO for a state agency (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).

One simple way to increase supportive followers to an agency page is to reach out to staff and enlist their support. A PIO for a federal agency added “... we have enough of our own employees who act as advocates and can help get the right answers to folks... Keeping a credible presence helps build a crowd that can help” (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).

Moderating Comments

Several insightful and diplomatic options for handling negative comments were revealed in the survey process. Many respondents use an online version of the same basic skill sets in which PIOs have been trained for while working with the media. These skill sets include maintaining professionalism, staying on message, and not engaging a negative conversation in a public arena.

No survey respondent encouraged engaging in a continuing conversation with a troll, however there were several recommendations to redirect negative conversations to an offline format. "...If there is a direct question or chance to rectify false information, we respond to those portions of the inflammatory comment. We do not continue going back and forth in an argumentative manner. We opt to try to take comments 'offline' through direct message to our page or by calling the office if they'd prefer. We do not delete comments and have hid few beyond what is automatically hidden through profanity filters," said a survey respondent from a local municipality (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).

Hiding comments, even if just until the post cools off, has been an effective tactic for some PIOs. "Social media posts are a huge problem. However, we usually take the high road to whatever is posted by thanking them for their comment and asking them to private message us or contact us in person to discuss further. 95% of the time that usually ends it. In our case, 3% of the time they call and 2% of the time they continue to post which is when we begin hiding their posts. In our experience usually after we hide a few posts there is no further escalation," stated a PIO for a hospital in the survey (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).

While deleting negative comments was an infrequent moderation tactic, the exception to this, as one would expect, was life safety. "Our policy is going to be two attempts to correct or

inform the poster and then let the issue go. The only time this policy will change is in a declared state of emergency and the troll is contradicting life safety information,” stated a PIO from a local municipality.

The holy grail of responding to a negative post is to turn the situation into an opportunity to educate the troll and the public. “If inflammatory comments are off topic, we delete them per our provided policy. Response otherwise depends on the nature of the comment. We comment publicly if it serves a greater good, and privately if it does not,” stated a PIO from a local municipality.

A survey respondent from the health care industry added, “If it is a legitimate complaint, we have a script ‘It sounds like we didn’t meet your expectations. Please call xxx-xxxx so that we can address your complaint.’ In addition, if we have a real name, we have a process to address with our Governance Risk and Compliance department. Ultimately, we’d like to be able to evaluate complaints and exercise service recovery if possible (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).”

Banning Users

Banning users was even less popular with survey respondents than deleting comments. Survey research showed that more than two-thirds of PIOs erred on the side of caution when deciding to ban a user – and many were advised by legal departments to do so. Several who had banned users, or inherited banned users when they began managing social media for their agencies, have since unbanned them.

To Post or Not to Post

Each opportunity to craft a thoughtful, engaging post is like a deposit in the bank of public trust, however a post that generates a negative reaction can bring about a significant withdrawal. If each social media manager had a steady stream of positive posts to deposit, their public trust account would stay soundly in the black but that is an option for few public agencies.

Unfortunately, in an effort to not arouse trolls, some PIOs are defaulting to using social media to a lesser extent. Approximately one-third (31.34%) surveyed said they sometimes, usually or always used a different platform than social media for messages that might be challenging to moderate. “I strive to post content that isn't that interesting... Try to have bulletproof content when possible. We don't talk about pending legislation,” said a survey respondent with a federal agency (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).

Regrettably, the threat of being trolled is at least occasionally the cause of missed opportunities to get a message quickly and easily to the public. “There are some stories or incidents we don't publicize on Facebook, specifically, to avoid harsh/negative comments,” added a survey respondent from a state or state agency (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey).

Discussion

The research conducted for this paper yielded interesting yet discouraging findings regarding the causes of trolling behavior, many helpful encouraging tactics by which PIOs use to mitigate against trolling damage, and some areas which need to be further addressed.

Remarkably, more than half of the PIOs surveyed did not have a professional social media archiving service (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey). Several responded as

using screenshots for archiving, however, screenshots will miss comments to posts that are deleted by the poster. In Florida, which has one of the country's most stringent public records laws, anything posted to the site is subject to public records request including comments by others. As public sector agencies are obligated to maintain transparency, they don't have the luxury of deleting posts or comments despite how inappropriate they may be. Considering followers can, at least on Facebook and Instagram, edit or delete their comments within seconds of submitting them, an automatic archiving system offers a valuable service in retaining those records even if they are deleted before the moderator is alerted they were posted. Having a qualified archiving system offers the PIO an extra tool in the public records retention toolbox in the event of litigation.

After a thorough analysis of the survey developed for this paper, several improvements were made apparent. While a question was asked as to how many team members can check an agency's social media accounts, perhaps more importantly would have been a question regarding how many hours a PIO works on his or her social media accounts outside traditional work hours. The experience of this PIO is that monitoring social media is the first task done upon waking and the last done before sleep, every single day, with many quick checks throughout the day. Helping leadership understand the time and energy required for monitoring and moderating a platform that never sleeps is an important step in improving working conditions for the social media manager. With every PIO surveyed having at least one social media account (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey), additional research on best practices and staffing optimization would be highly beneficial towards preventing burnout.

Currently, a keyword search of the word "troll" in the Facebook (Figure 1) and Twitter (Figure 2) help centers render no results, although both have an option to report a comment for a

variety of issues. Expanding this research to study any advantages of using these reporting services as well as any negative post alerting tools would be valuable to the social media manager. Several survey respondents mentioned in follow-up conversations that they desired the ability to edit posts on Twitter. Adding a question in the initial PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey as to what editing or moderation tools the respondents would like to see developed would be beneficial for this research.

Social media is constantly evolving. Developing a definitive set of legal guidelines for the management of negative posts would not be easily done, but would offer better protection for those who make the determinations on how to mitigate the damage of trolls, while still being mindful of the citizens' First Amendment rights. Additionally, a better understanding of social media in general would be helpful for elected officials, policy makers, and leadership, suggested more than one survey respondent.

Despite the risks of troll attacks, social media has been shown to be an invaluable tool for disseminating public information. All of the PIOs surveyed use at least one agency social media channel to deliver the right information to the right people at the right time (Appendix: PIOs and Social Media Trolls survey). The social media manager of a public agency must endeavor to stay abreast of the latest tools and best practices for using this communications bridge, all while maintaining a watchful eye for the trolls who lurk beneath.

References

- Cheng, J., Bernstein, M., Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, C. & Leskovec, J. (2017). Anyone Can Become a Troll: Causes of Trolling Behavior in Online Discussions. CSCW Conf Comput Support Coop Work, 1-18.
- Destiny, O. & Asude, E. (2018) Social Media and Crisis Management: A Review and Analysis of Existing Studies, EUL Journal of Social Sciences, 1-11.
- Longworth, A. (1965) The Sharpest Wit in Washington, The Saturday Evening Post 24 (238), 32.
- Lopes, B. & Yu, H. (2017). Who Do You Troll and Why: An Investigation into the Relationship Between the Dark Triad Personalities and Online Trolling Behaviors Towards Popular and Less Popular Facebook Profiles. Computers in Human Behavior, 1-2.
- March, E. & Marrington, J. (2018). A Qualitative Analysis of Internet Trolling, Cyperpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 22 (3), 192-197.
- Nuccitelli, M., 100+ Types of Internet Troll & Internet Troll Definition (retrieved July 23, 2019). <https://darkpsychology.co/internet-troll-definition>.
- Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. CyberPsychology & Behavior, 7 (3), 321.
- Wolfe, C. (2018). Democracy under threat? Journalists need help in handling internet trolls, Anti-social Media?: The Impact on Journalism and Society, 1-5.
- Wolfe, C. (2019). Online trolls, journalists and freedom of speech: Are the bullies taking over? Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics, 16 (1), 11-21.

Footnotes

¹. According to the survey results, people who thought being trolled by others was funny had actively engaged in trolling activities themselves (Marcy & Marrington, 2019).

Table(s)

Table 1

How many social media accounts does your organization manage?

Accounts	1	2	3	4	4+
Facebook	65	22	16	6	40
Twitter	73	26	14	3	23
Instagram	74	19	3	1	12
Nextdoor	42	11	1	0	2
LinkedIn	64	3	3	0	3
SnapChat	9	1	0	0	0

Note: Sixteen respondents also listed managing YouTube, Google My Business, Flickr, Pinterest, Vimeo, Nixle, Ring Neighbors, Blogger, and smartphone apps.

Figure(s)

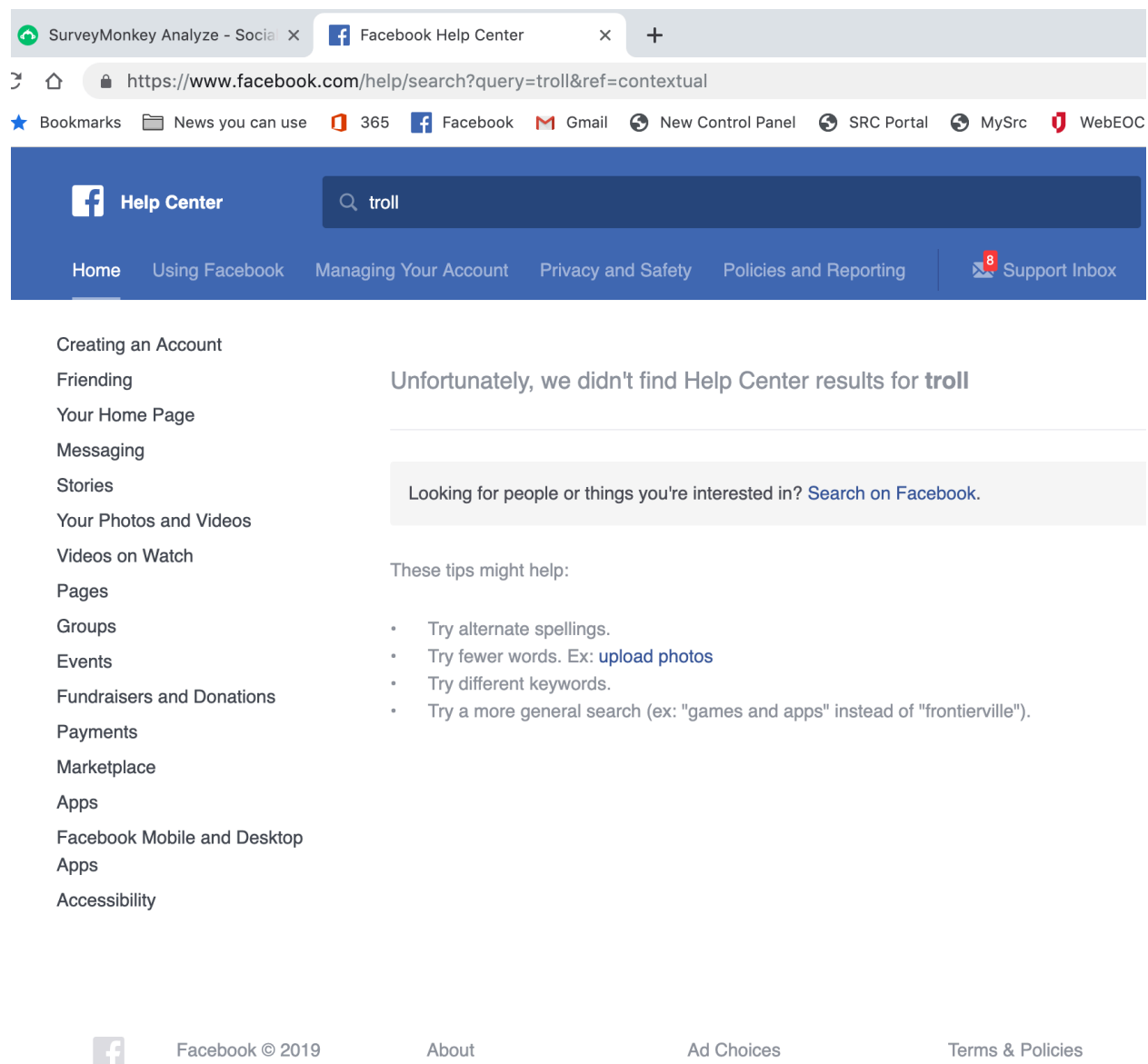


Figure 1. Screen shot of search results for the keyword “troll” in Facebook Help Center.

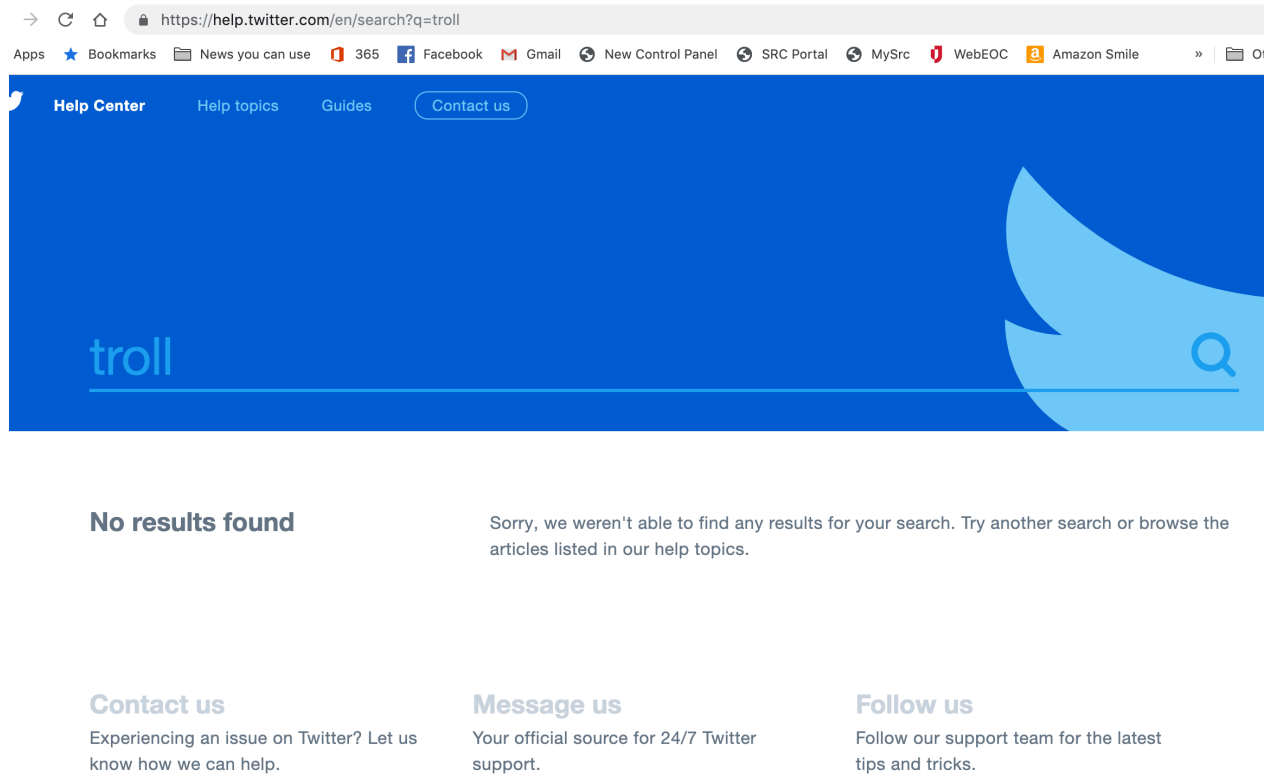


Figure 2. Screen shot of search results for the keyword “troll” in Twitter Help Center.

Appendix

Appendix included separately as Appendix - PIOs and Social Media Trolls.pdf.